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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001726

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/30/2029
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION WINS 3 OF 5 IN BY-ELECTION; BALANCE OF
POWER UNCHANGED

REF: SEOUL 1683 (BY-ELECTION PREVIEW)

Classified By: POL M/C James L. Wayman. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

[11](#). (C) Summary: The opposition Democratic Party (DP) won three of five open National Assembly (NA) seats in an October 28 by-election, including the two swing seats in the Seoul capital region. The ruling Grand National Party (GNP) won two seats and was disappointed not to win one of the seats in the capital region. Though some observers are calling the results a "crushing defeat" for the GNP, the GNP's two seats are the first win for a ruling party in a by-election in seven years. The elections were a test for both parties' leadership, and GNP Chairman Chung Mong-jung will be under pressure for not delivering better results. The outcome does not change the balance of power in the NA, with the GNP maintaining a strong majority. End Summary.

Results

[12](#). (U) Five vacant seats in the National Assembly were up for grabs in the October 28 by elections. The DP won three seats: Suwon (DP: 49.2 percent; GNP: 42.6 percent) and Ansan (DP: 41.1; GNP: 33.1) in the Seoul capital region and Jeungpyeong (DP: 41.9; GNP: 29.6) in North Chungcheong Province. The GNP won two seats: Yangsan (GNP: 38.1; DP: 34.0) in South Gyeongsang Province and Gangneung (GNP: 40.19; Independent: 11.5) in Gangwon Province. Voter turnout in this election was relatively high at 39 percent, but did not match turnout in April's by-election, which exceeded 40 percent. Turnout was highest in Yangsan (43.9 percent) and lowest in Ansan (29.3 percent).

Fall Out

[13](#). (C) Though the results do not affect the balance of power in the NA, the DP's three wins were a big boost to the party's image and morale. Far outnumbered in the NA and trailing the GNP in the polls on approval rating (16 percent to the GNP's 27 percent in a recent poll) the victories will energize the party's preparations for the important June 2010 regional elections to elect governors, mayors, and local councils. Ironically, the party has been so weak and ineffective that some party members were hopeful that failure at the polls would force a change in party leadership. To their consternation, however, DP Chairmen Chung Sye-kyun appears to have forestalled any chance of major changes in the party's leadership ranks.

[14](#). (C) Despite being the first ruling party to win seats in a by-election in seven years, the GNP failed to live up to

expectations that it would win three or four seats. So the election was a disappointment for the GNP, but not a "crushing defeat" as some press reports characterized it. Suwon, the capital of Gyeonggi Province, was the most closely watched contest because it was seen as an electoral barometer of the important Seoul capital region. GNP insiders who were cautiously optimistic that the GNP would win the seat by a narrow margin had told us that Chung Mong-jung would be replaced as party chair if he lost Suwon. Nobody has stepped forward to challenge Chung Mong-jung yet, but party insiders are frustrated by Chung's inability to win the seat. They criticized Chung's choice of candidate in Suwon, who was so unappealing, they said, that the more she campaigned the lower her numbers went. Chung also failed to persuade party rival Park Guen-hye and her faction to campaign for GNP candidates, except in Yangsan.

NA Distribution of Seats

15. (U) Unrelated to the by-election, the Constitutional Court issued a ruling on October 29 allowing parties to replace proportional representatives who had lost their seats to due campaign finance irregularities. The ruling overturned NA rules that allowed parties to replace members who represented districts but prohibited them from replacing proportional representatives. Vacant district seats are filled in by-elections. Parties fill vacant proportional seats by choosing the next available name on its list of nominees from the last general election (April 2008). There are four seats affected by the October 29 ruling: one for the DP and three for the conservative Pro-Park Alliance. Of the 299 seats in

the NA, 54 are proportional.

16. (U) The GNP maintains a solid majority in the NA. The by-election and the Court's ruling mean that 298 of the 299 seats are now occupied. The one vacant seat belonged to minor opposition party leader Moon Kuk-hyun, who was found guilty of campaign finance irregularities. It will be filled in a by-election next spring. Seats are currently distributed as follows:

169 GNP
87 DP
17 Liberty Forward Party
8 Pro-Park Alliance
5 Democratic Labor Party
2 Renewal of Korea Party
1 New Progressive Party
9 Independent
1 Vacant

STEPHENS